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THE POLITICAL CHARACTER OF SYMPATHY

Andrew Burstein

The generation of scholars responsible for establishing classical republicanism as the dominant paradigm for explaining the American Revolution premised its view on the opposition of virtue and corruption in government. This has sparked many scholarly discussions over the years on the relative value of liberal ideas and republicanism (the relative strength of individualism versus a concept of the public good). But, as many have also suggested, the paradigm says far too little about the emotional content of actual speech, the culture of speechmaking, and reading and writing in the Republic more generally.

This essay means to expand upon what I set out to do in writing *Sentimental Democracy*, to engage closely with elements missing from the republicanism-liberalism formula, especially the sentimental identity embraced in Revolution-era speech. The language of sentiment and sympathy held an irresistible appeal to the founders while conveying republican thought beyond elite culture. It was used to describe the character of Americans in very personal terms, humanizing the abstract notion of “the people.” Yet historians have undervalued sentimental language, while literary scholars and theorists who write of sentimentalism routinely avoid the trenches in which political actors operated. What is at stake here is defining what we mean by “political.” For this reason, I wish to demonstrate the political resonance of the prevailing sympathetic discourse, take it in context, and give it fuller application.

Nearly a quarter-century after his *Creation of the American Republic* described the founding with a classical republican vocabulary and in constitutional terms, Gordon S. Wood made an effort to synthesize the movement from republicanism to democracy—that energetic democracy to which Jackson gave his name but in fact “legitimated” rather than “created.”

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Wood's 1992 book, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, may have enjoyed a mixed reception (historians have trained themselves to be skeptical of any synthetic work); yet I intend to show that his redefinition of citizenship in the postrevolutionary decades, and his fairly brief but leading suggestion that sympathy and compassion held an important role in "this new republicanized world," are more significant than even Wood, perhaps, would maintain. In this regard, I will concentrate on the chapters of his book that segue from "Benevolence" under republicanism to "Equality" under democracy. Whether the Revolution was as radical as Wood's title proposes (that it contained "a decidedly social message") is less important here than his understanding that a powerful idiom existed whereby the practice of humanity was believed by many to be the glue that would unite classes and geographical sections; and that the ideology we are speaking to held at least as wide an appeal as "the belief in ascetic classical virtue."¹

According to Wood, an emerging morality consistent with eighteenth-century scientific investigation and Enlightenment optimism and cosmopolitanism made friendship appear to be a viable political principle.

I go beyond this, and state unequivocally that sentiment was a critical tool (heretofore marginalized or feminized) in defining the cause of Independence in opposition to the political parent in 1776, and that, ever since, sentiment/sympathy has been a distinguishing component of America's national self-image and at the core of its foreign policy. Indeed, nothing has been more American than sentimental persuasion.

Let me add a necessary clarification. Those with an aversion to terms such as "democracy," "nation," "America," or "American," purport that these are monolithic constructions. They are fluid terms, rather, and critics need to appreciate that "America" and "American" were readily understood by historical actors across political generations as terms by which to identify *themselves*, and to express an ideal of unity. Thus the "American" sensibility or political sympathy I invoke represents widely shared assumptions acted out in political discourse.²

¹ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1992), 5, 218-24, 303.

² Literary critic Christopher Looby opens his *Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States* (Chicago, 1996) by characterizing the "invented" or "imaginary" America as "a human contrivance, an artifact of history," and as the first modern nation "founded in a self-conscious performative act of new political creation," forever rich in rhetorical or symbolic self-fashioning, "spoken into being" (2-4). Looby's notion, drawing upon Benedict Anderson's influential *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, UK, 1983), may strike some historians

To bolster my study of the politicized culture of sensibility, I have drawn upon a slender but remarkably comprehensive volume, Ann Jessie Van Sant's *Eighteenth Century Sensibility and the Novel: The Senses in Social Context*. Also, though it did not appear until after my own book had gone to press, Julia A. Stern's *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* relates voice and politics, idealized community, and the real effects of loss; the author appreciates rhetoric and reality in a way that transcends the life of the novel and captures the psychic dimension of the struggle to define the new national identity—especially of the critical 1790s, when a reactive psychology most vividly threatened to undermine republican sympathy.³

I begin with a representative work. William Wirt's *The Letters of the British Spy* (1803) belongs to that genre, deriving in part from Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), which tested categories of observable social and environmental conditions to monitor the health of the early American republic.⁴ The thirty-year-old son of a Maryland tavern owner, and painstaking in his ambitious climb to respectability, this future U. S. attorney general and presidential candidate published his serialized observations by affecting the persona of a British visitor describing Virginians' qualities. To carry off his literary deception, Wirt employed neoclassical elegance, while also highlighting attitudes to contrast American pluck with British over-refinement. *The Letters of the British Spy* was a

as an overdramatization of the obvious, but it becomes more relevant below, as I go on to examine the perceived value of oratory in the development of a sympathetic dimension to the idealized functioning of a representative democracy: the coherent nation requires a coherent language. On the use of "nationalism" and "democracy," see Andrew Burstein, *Sentimental Democracy: The Evolution of America's Romantic Self-Image* (New York, 1999), xvi-xviii.

³ Ann Jessie Van Sant, *Eighteenth Century Sensibility and the Novel: The Senses in Social Context* (Cambridge, 1993); Julia A. Stern, *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* (Chicago, 1997). Though less invested in historians' work, Elizabeth Barnes recognizes as well the sympathetic dimension of the political founding, celebrating union "by imagining diverse individuals connected in a sympathetic chain." See Barnes, *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel* (New York, 1997), 1-3.

⁴ On the genre common to Jefferson's and Wirt's productions, including method of argumentation and the role of physical description, see Pamela Regis, *Describing Early America: Bartram, Jefferson, Crèvecoeur, and the Influence of Natural History* (Dekalb, IL, 1992); and George Alan Davy, "Argumentation and Unified Structure in *Notes on the State of Virginia*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 26 (no. 4, 1993), 581-93.

critique of Virginians' uncertain movement from deference to the Revolution's egalitarian principle they so conspicuously professed.

Although Richmond was the primary site of his investigation, Wirt's stated purpose was to uncover the *American* character. Like the anthropological Jefferson in *Notes*, he mingled sensational statements with deadening geological theories. In one of the most dramatic passages in the text, Wirt finally found his mark by characterizing the enduring historical value of oratory in defining genius. He praised the honorable energy of the political speech giver in persuading people from all walks of life to embrace his cause: "What the charm by which the orator binds the senses of his audience; by which he attunes and touches and sweeps the human lyre. . . . Is not the whole mystery comprehended in one word, SYMPATHY?" It was the one word in the entire book that was capitalized for effect.⁵

Sympathy, Wirt explained, was a force that can be felt in different ways: by attachment to the heart of another, through a transformative, imaginative power capable of being received through published works of "genius" and "magnanimity," and, most markedly, by experiencing the sublime effect of great oratory. If he is to be honest and thoroughly successful, Wirt went on, the orator must be introspective, confirming that the "convictions and sensations" he expresses are "sincerely felt." Excepting the late patriot Patrick Henry, four years in his grave by the time of *The British Spy*, Wirt bemoaned the lack of "quick, eager, palpitating" oratory in America; for, he felt, the sympathetic impulse of a powerful orator can be nowhere more valuable than in a republic.⁶

Then why has the power of sympathy as a political force been generally overlooked by historians? In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, oratory was perceived to have a wide effect because it might engage at the same time a combined audience of elites and more ordinary citizens. "Passion easily rises in a great assembly," wrote the esteemed Scottish rhetorician Dr. Hugh Blair in his trans-Atlantic standard, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), "where the movements are communicated by mutual sympathy between the orator and the audience." That sympathy, he made clear, was equally conveyed in political assemblies, from the pulpit, and in the courtroom.⁷ Prior to Blair, *The Art*

⁵ William Wirt, *The Letters of the British Spy* (1803; rep., Chapel Hill, 1970), Letter III, 137.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 137-46. On the metaphorical power of the heart, in this context, see Robert A. Erickson, *The Language of the Heart, 1600-1750* (Philadelphia, 1997).

⁷ Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (Philadelphia, 1833), 276-84, 288 (quotation), 318-21. Like Wirt, Blair observed that dignity and simplicity—plain words—were the most powerful, and truth was revealed through a superior understanding

of *Speaking* by James Burgh (1764; Philadelphia edition, 1775) stood by itself as Americans' foremost guide to using emotion to persuade. Republicanizing the art of eloquence, Burgh lifted the "tongue of the orator" to the stature of "the sceptre of the monarch."⁸

Also in this vein, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776), as historians have been saying for years, owed its unprecedented appeal to the use of a vernacular less exclusive than that of preceding political pamphlets. Moreover, Paine predicated his most influential work on a permeating quality of sympathy. "The cause of America is in great measure the cause of all mankind," he wrote potently in introducing his pamphlet, universalizing "the principles of all Lovers of Mankind" amid a struggle in which "their Affections are interested," knowing that "Nature hath given the Power of feeling" to all. Later in the text he referred to the "weeping voice of nature" crying out for separation, and again noted that the historical moment partook of "feelings and affections which nature justifies, and without which, we should be incapable of discharging the social duties of life, or enjoying the felicities of it."⁹

This is a persistent idiom. We can place alongside Paine's forceful prose Jefferson's First Inaugural Address of 1801, with its appeal to citizens to recover "that harmony and affection"—again, a sympathetic communion—"without which Liberty, & even Life itself, are but dreary things." As Paine remarked that King George III "with the pretended title of FATHER OF HIS PEOPLE can unfeelingly hear of their slaughter," Jefferson's Declaration of Independence branded the tyrant king for making subjects and citizens "executioners of their friends and brethren" and for having, predator-like, "sent hither swarms of officers to harass our people and eat out their substance." Americans, the Declaration further noted, had

of human nature: "To be able to unfold the heart, and to discover a man to himself . . . produces a wonderful effect." Although presumed to be beneath the intangible "splendour" of the ancient world's orators, all modern speech was said to involve speaking to a "multitude" and was concerned with "interesting and engaging the heart." Blair's text was widely used in American universities through the Civil War era.

⁸ Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, 1993), 30-31. Fliegelman makes a strong case not only for the oratorical flavor of the Declaration but for the increasing importance given to public revelation of the private self in American culture at this time. For transitions in oratorical culture after 1800, see Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, 1990); and Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran, eds., *Oratorical Culture in Nineteenth-Century America: Transformations in the Theory and Practice of Rhetoric* (Carbondale, IL, 1993).

⁹ "Common Sense," in *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings*, ed. Eric Foner (New York, 1995), 5-6, 25, 27, 29.

appealed over and over to the "native justice and magnanimity" of their "British brethren," who despite "ties of our common kindred" remained "deaf to the voice of justice and consanguinity." The king heard "unfeelingly," and his countrymen remained "deaf" to natural sensibilities.¹⁰ Lord Cornwallis, "An American Soldier" wrote in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* shortly after the Battle of Yorktown, was "callous to the tender emotions of compassion, and steeled against the miseries of your fellow creatures."¹¹

The later playwright and essayist Judith Sargent Murray wrote in 1778 to her soldier-brother of the passionate, sympathetic union of those at home and those off fighting: "Shall we not rise or fall with those to whom, by ties the most enduring, we have eternally loved?" She conveyed in heartfelt words the same effect that Jefferson had previewed in 1776: "for us Moderation hath fled from our borders. . . . It is truly distressing, truly wonderful, to see those individuals who were heretofore bound in bonds of consanguinity and united in the most endearing friendship, now kindle in the most portentous rage, upon every discovery of opposite sentiments." There was a constant vocabulary of sympathy based on natural affinities and the resulting shock that came from the unanticipated loss of that sympathy. In pursuit of social harmony, the good, the patient, the humble were portrayed as tragically disappointed by the unfeeling impulse of the barbarous.¹²

In her three-volume *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* (1805), Mercy Otis Warren prefaced her work by declaring "the fervency of her wishes for the happiness of all the human race," and suggested the role of sympathy in the text to follow by describing "the theatre of human action" as the field for the historian to "scrutinize the windings of the heart." For Warren, in a Jeffersonian cadence, history contrasted "turbulent passions" with "beauty and harmony." Hers was a moral examination of the revolutionary conflict, a dramatic struggle, in her

¹⁰ Significantly, Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration is even more replete with the language of betrayed feeling than the final version adopted by Congress. The "facts" of Britain's rapacity "have given the last stab to agonizing affection, and manly spirit bids us to renounce for ever these unfeeling brethren. We must endeavor to forget our former love for them." See *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd, et al. (18 vols., Princeton, 1950-71), 1:426-27. In both drafts of the Declaration, the opposite of sympathy is "insult" and "repeated injury." Jefferson's ideal, though his partisan behavior after 1792 belied his harmonious pronouncements, was to make permanent a public quality of sympathy and allow power to be offset by a different emotional posture: for American political culture to be strong it had to be built on conciliation.

¹¹ *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia), Nov. 14, 1781.

¹² Judith Sargent to Winthrop Sargent, Feb. 25, 1778, in Shiela L. Skemp, *Judith Sargent Murray* (New York, 1998), 137.

words, against human flaws, follies, foolhardiness, vanity, and crimes, in order to establish a nation marked by “justice, benignity, and all the mild virtues of humanity.” Her ultimate hope for the Republic (even after the revolutionaries’ subsequent division into disputatious political parties) rested upon the patriots’ record of restraining the unhealthy passions: “Few histories,” she wrote, “have recorded examples of equal moderation and less violation of the feelings of humanity.” A capacity for sympathy had once, and might still, sustain the republican spirit.¹³

Thus *The British Spy*, with its linkage of “genius” and “magnanimity,” and its evocation of sympathy, is unquestionably a political text. Much as Wirt’s argumentation and organizational technique borrowed from Jefferson’s *Notes*, the logic underlying his moral advocacy was a standard inherited from the preceding generation as well, when sympathy was implicitly understood as a political force. It was in terms of felt and unfelt sympathy that the Revolutionary People of Feeling, as it were, justified their announcements of alienation from the unfeeling brethren rebuked in both *Common Sense* and Jefferson’s Declaration. A perceived emotional abandonment by those to whom Americans had been attached previously by “the ties of common kindred,” caused the patient patriots, as they consistently characterized themselves, finally to “acquiesce in the necessity” of an emotionally life-saving release from abuse, aided by the related conviction that happiness was an inalienable right.

Nevertheless, the power of sympathy was long relegated by scholars to discussions of a domesticated sentimental literature. The historiography concerning republicanism identifies “idioms” and “vocabularies” without giving much attention to a politicized literary sensibility, just as literary scholars have largely ignored the actual conditions of politics and the extent and significance of open debates among early national political figures. In his 1992 article, “Republicanism: The Career of a Concept,” Daniel T. Rodgers coherently traced two decades of intellectual arguments among historians, making sense of the struggle to define a protean term. He asked: “Was [republicanism] an ideology, with the power to construct the imaginable possibilities of behavior? A language precluding rival languages?” No one before or since has provided satisfactory answers to these questions. Rodgers concluded serenely that it was “the investment of language and culture” that gave republicanism its conceptual

¹³ Mercy Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* (3 vols., Boston, 1805), 1: viii, 2-3, 3:428.

comprehensibility, but he left open the matter of whether there was one language or more.¹⁴

Rodgers was precise in observing that one of the crucial elements in solving the puzzle must be to find a place for Tom Paine: Paine was both radical and republican, his language not of one identifiable class. I wish to suggest again that the missing element in republicanism is the binding element in Paine's social maneuverability, the sentimental identity contained in his writing; and that the emotional model presented by America's "forest Demosthenes," the activist orator Patrick Henry, represents another, comparable standard, a "rival" language, as Rodgers would have it, allowing us to expand the boundaries set by those scholars who first presented the republican paradigm.

Obviously, the Revolution was motivated by emotional as well as intellectual concerns. The revolutionary script included a vocabulary of solicitation and persuasion that went well beyond the classical dichotomy of virtue and corruption or the particular attributes of English law. A dynamic language and culture of eighteenth-century sensibility—that which placed "magnanimous" feeling in opposition to unjust or tyrannical unfeeling—propelled public-minded individuals toward charitable, patriotic, community-minded actions.

Sympathy makes sense as a category of political thought and action for many reasons, but one is that the revolutionary generation recognized the limitations of the classical model that the historiography of republicanism invoked. Historian Mercy Otis Warren again provides insight. Although conversant with Greek and Roman examples, she privileged what she described as real, present, viscerally felt recollection over the values of the past (as ruins are said to have little meaning unless infused with the emotions of those who once inhabited them). In her words, "Time may unlock the cabinets of princes, unfold the secret negotiations of statesmen, and hand down the immortal characters of dignified worth. . . . But truth is most likely to be exhibited by the general sense of contemporaries."¹⁵

Other revolutionary historians tried as she did to equate their cause with truthful reporting, but it was Warren who said most directly that "feelings of the heart" were engaged when history was being told fresh.¹⁶ Historians

¹⁴ Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: the Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History*, 79 (June 1992), 11-38.

¹⁵ Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution*, 1:3.

¹⁶ In his study of revolutionary compilers of American history, Lester H. Cohen writes that "they saw no contradiction between taking the American side and telling the truth. . . . They felt strongly that historical writings were, or ought to be, instruments of an American

of early American religious practice, like Nathan O. Hatch, Ruth H. Bloch, Ernest Lee Tuveson, and Sacvan Bercovitch, have demonstrated the impact of sermonic appeals on revolutionary ideology and the language of nation building,¹⁷ but religion was not the only source of emotionalism during this period.¹⁸ Mercy Warren's contemporaries worked breathlessly upon the public in a variety of ways and venues, in churches and other public assemblies, as well as in books, pamphlets, and newspapers, by lacing weighty arguments with eloquent expressions of commonly understood feelings. As useful and illustrative as classical knowledge was, it did not entirely address the emotional needs of the revolutionary generation.

Within the structure of republicanism's historiography, matters of power and constitutional revision by and large supplanted discussion of emotional balance. Faction was presented in deliberative terms: democracy paradigmatically stood for virtue, aristocracy for honor, monarchy for fear. This is not a comprehensive enough argument, of course, for even in the most renowned catalogue of governmental forms available to the American revolutionaries, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*, one can find legitimation for the exercise of noble passions. Reason, wrote Montesquieu, "never produces great effects on the spirits of men," and indeed, without the passions reason would "undertake enterprises against its true interests." National life was necessarily "led by its passions." Furthermore, "If there were in the world a nation which had a sociable humor, an openness of heart; a joy in life, a taste, an ease in communicating its thoughts . . . and which had with all that, courage, generosity, frankness, and a certain point of honor, one should avoid disturbing its manners by laws, in order not to disturb its virtues." The French political philosopher appears in this

vision." See Cohen, *The Revolutionary Histories: Contemporary Narratives of the American Revolution* (Ithaca, 1980), 183-84.

¹⁷ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven, 1977); Ruth H. Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800* (Cambridge, UK, 1985); Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago, 1968); Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, WI, 1978).

¹⁸ Ignoring the emotional component of language amid the revolutionary struggle, earlier historiography presented change in terms of laws, customs, schemes, systems—balance as something different from emotional harmony. Symptomatic of the neglect of conscience as something other than a reasoned response, Bernard Bailyn dismisses Americans' emotionalism by citing the "famous clause" of the Virginia Declaration of Rights of 1776, in which it is stated that religion—the one place where he alludes to sparks of sentiment—"can be directed only by reason and conviction." See Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), 160-61.

instance a confirmed Jeffersonian, privileging mild government where sympathy and magnanimity are said to reign.¹⁹

Here we return again to Gordon Wood. Philosophizing “benevolence” in the republic, the historian states: “Ultimately the Enlightenment aimed at nothing less than discovering the hidden forces in the moral world that moved and held people together, forces that could match the great eighteenth-century scientific discoveries of the hidden forces—gravity, magnetism, electricity, and energy—that operated in the physical world.” This is a remarkable statement, opening a new avenue of inquiry, hinting strongly at the influence of medical-scientific understandings upon the consciences of Revolution-era political activists.²⁰

What, then, were the perceived “hidden forces in the moral world” that allowed an idealization of human behavior within the revolutionary environment? They were the forces of sympathy and generosity that common medical understandings and sentimental literature combined to promote at the point where secular and religious benevolence met. Social affections, as they were known, had their origin in the human species, and notions of political happiness borrowed heavily from this vocabulary. The republic of letters went beyond the “fellowship of intellect” that Wood evoked²¹ to encompass a powerful fictive community of moral sentiment.

This is well illustrated in the writings and lectures of James Wilson, a prominent and controversial delegate to the Constitutional Convention from Pennsylvania. Wilson was a well-rounded thinker whose rational judgments are often cited but who was also inclined toward a sympathy-based understanding of constitutionalism. Born in Scotland, he lectured that natural law, as “the harmony of the world,” partook of sympathy, and he emphasized “conscience” as much as “reason.” He praised the natural endowment of the moral imagination, observing that “Truth may, indeed, by reasoning, be rendered evident to the understanding; but it cannot reach the heart, unless by means of the imagination.” The universality of the moral sense was even larger in his view, it seems, than it was for the politically optimistic Jefferson. “The qualities of love, gratitude, sympathy unfold themselves in the first stages of life,” Wilson asserted, “and the approbation of those qualities accompanies the first dawn of reflection. . . . The force of the moral sense is diffused through every part of life.” History, poetry, music, and art demonstrated this moral excellence for him,

¹⁹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. and ed. Anne M. Cohler *et al.* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), Book 19, chaps. 5 and 27, 310, 327-28.

²⁰ Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 218.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 221.

and though decrying men who exhibited “no sympathetick sense of what is melting or tender,” he linked actions and affections as the most commonly perceptible representations of a dynamic human sensibility.²²

At this juncture, the relationship between the politicized culture of sympathy and the Scottish Enlightenment ought to be touched upon. The Scottish philosophes, including Francis Hutcheson, Lord Kames, David Hume, and Adam Smith, were political in their common goal of bringing justice to civilized nations, in projecting a peaceful world, and in seeing the need to establish liberty and happiness. On another level, they helped remove the study of human knowledge from a concern with rational nature to a less mechanical model, appreciating the role of passions and sensations. Edinburgh and Glasgow supported literary clubs and became centers of medical discourse during the Scottish Enlightenment, and the philosophes’ interest in so-called natural sentiments undoubtedly influenced many of America’s revolutionaries. But the philosophes represent only one, and at that a highly intellectual, approach to sympathy. Their impact remains hard to gauge. As Henry F. May put it, the Scottish school was a body of thought “united by tone and origin rather than by doctrine.”²³

In her book *American Virtues*, Jean M. Yarbrough reflects on Jefferson’s invocations of the moral sense and suggests that he understood

²² “Of the General Principles of Law and Obligation,” and “The Law of Nature” (1790), in *The Works of James Wilson*, ed. Robert Green McClosky (2 vols., Cambridge, MA, 1967), 2:101-35. Wilson’s understanding of the roles and relationship between sense and imagination in the formulation of ideas seems to reflect those of David Hume, who wrote that human beings recall sensation to the mind by use of the imagination. Privileging sense, Hume observed: “The most lively thought is still inferior to the dullest sensation.” Morals, which derive from the development of ideas into humane sentiments, “some internal sense of feeling,” were rooted in nature. And moral sentiment, “the force of many sympathies,” the cultivation of “inward beauty and grace,” “constancy in friendships, attachments and familiarities,” taught duty and made one a valued member of society. See Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, UK, 1975), 17-18, 169-75, 268-78.

²³ Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York, 1976), 343-46. A persuasive argument that popular philosophies of altruism adopted by Jefferson and others were not exclusive to the Scottish Enlightenment is in Norman S. Fiering, “Irresistible Compassion: An Aspect of Eighteenth-Century Sympathy and Humanitarianism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 37 (Apr.-June 1976), 195-218. Fiering notes that Jefferson conflated several ethico-psychological qualities to form his abiding sense of duty to others, what the author calls “irresistible compassion,” and which many of this era considered to be “self-evident fact.” A useful adjunct is Stephen D. Cox, “*The Stranger Within Thee*”: *Concepts of Self in Late Eighteenth-Century Literature* (Pittsburgh, 1980), esp. chaps. 2-3 on the Scottish philosophes. For a good overview, see Jane Rendall, *The Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment* (New York, 1978).

this faculty as an ineradicable human attribute, yet one that corruption in society could “warp and distort.” Always insisting that virtue did not require religion, Jefferson is easier than most of his contemporaries to associate with Scottish common sense; in his famous use of the Head-Heart dichotomy, as well as the contrast offered in his *Notes* on the “ploughman” who can decide moral questions at least as well as the “professor,” Jefferson took comfort in the virtuous potential of the endowed senses. In Yarbrough’s study, Jefferson’s repeated emphasis on a concept of justice in human affairs appears to situate him among the Scots as an advocate of “uncoerced acts of benevolence.” His faith in the capacity of ordinary individuals to attain moral competence equal to that of traditional elites was not meant, however, to represent the totality of Jeffersonian political thought; he simply meant that generosity and reasonableness were possible to translate on some level into policy.²⁴

It is Adam Smith, most of all among the Scottish philosophes, whose work concentrated on the social value of sympathy. Smith also adapted to the medical enlightenment that developed among French and Swiss physiologists and came to influence both sentimental literature and the republican idiom. In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Smith emphasized the experiences of pleasure and pain, in the context of a doctrine of sympathy, which he referred to as often as “fellow feeling.” He distinguished sympathy from mere pity, described the grief felt at apprehending others’ distress and, of importance in our consideration of *Common Sense* and the Declaration of Independence, wrote of the “natural” identification individuals have with feelings of resentment toward those who injure and oppress without concern for the sentiments of the sufferer.

Smith associated the “man of sensibility” with an “honourable passion” that must find balance because it is so compelling that it can otherwise make him overwrought. The “man within,” he noted democratically, profits from the discovery that “we are but one of the multitude.” But, again, it is hard to isolate the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment amid a variety

²⁴ Jean M. Yarbrough, *American Virtues: Thomas Jefferson on the Character of a Free People* (Lawrence, KS, 1998), 42-48; unpublished commentary on Yarbrough’s book by Michael Zuckert. I concur with Yarbrough’s critical appraisal of Wills’s treatment of Jefferson and the Scottish Enlightenment, *Inventing America: Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence* (Garden City, NY, 1978), as an overstatement of Jefferson’s allegiance to this school. In *The Inner Jefferson: Portrait of a Grieving Optimist* (Charlottesville, VA, 1995), I distinguish Jefferson’s epistolary personality, and the rhetorical value of sincerity, from his exclusion of those he rejects on an emotional level from his political circle; he divides his political opposition into essentially moral categories: “candid” (transformable through moral persuasion) and “perverted.”

of benevolence-based belief systems. Fraternal feeling and political leadership were combined in the Masonic movement of this period as well; many of the founders and such diverse leaders as George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, Henry Clay and Andrew Jackson, belonged to the exclusive organization, which prided itself on (and ritualized) a civic philanthropy, vague religiosity, and affection among their members.²⁵

The language and culture of sensibility, or refined manners, as it expanded and popularized the tenets of the Scottish Enlightenment, warrants our careful examination. Literate Americans of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as well as their English and French contemporaries, recognized nervous sensibility as the essence of life. Medical experts divided the human body into insensible, irritable, and sensible parts. The insensible did not respond to stimuli of any kind; the irritable was manifest in muscular contraction but lacked feeling;²⁶ the sensible, upon being touched, transmitted "impressions" to the soul, resulting in the organism's experience of pain or pleasure.²⁷

Because the unseen nerves possessed extreme sensibility, that is, because they were readily perceptible to the active brain, the nervous system was mysterious, dramatic, and productive of soulful power and purpose. Excitable and potentially convulsive, nerves were judged to distinctly, but somewhat unpredictably, affect human social behavior. "A Due Excitement is Necessary for the Maintenance of Health and Vigor," pronounced a key section heading in a medical discussion of the 1790s that explained the need for a balanced constitution: "every thing within us is in constant movement," and thus needed to be encouraged or restrained at the appropriate times. Attempts were made to relate such understandings to moral capacity and derive social expectations over the "course" of a lifetime.²⁸ Childhood displayed "abundant excitability"; in early adulthood

²⁵ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (London, 1976), 122, 137. On Masonry, see esp. Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840* (Chapel Hill, 1996); and Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 223-24.

²⁶ For instance, the heart was considered an organ of irritability, susceptible of motion or contraction (answering to stimuli) without precipitating feelings of sensibility in its operation of carrying the blood.

²⁷ *Medical Extracts: On the Nature of Health, with Practical Observations: and the Laws of the Nervous and Fibrous Systems*, vol. 2 (London, 1796), iv-xvi.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, xxviii-xxx. Movement and motion were understood in terms of excitement, giving a sense of regularity yet without assurance of success. In his *Dictionary*, Samuel Johnson uses the verb *to move* and the noun *motion* to describe events of uncertainty beyond routine human knowledge; see Robert DeMaria Jr., *Johnson's Dictionary and the Language*

"excitability is in due power"; and in old age this same quality became deficient. Nervous excitement roused heart and arteries into action and produced a visibly "ardent glow over the whole body, but more especially in the face; the eyes look red, the voice is loud." Such stimulus as that which provoked revenge enabled extraordinary acts; frustration begot "paleness," a faltering voice, and "tremor" in the limbs; in love, "vivacity cheers the countenance," "language is animated, and vigour augmented." All this was possible (and perceptible) because the skin was abundantly supplied with nerves. Thus honor and courage and patriotic sentiment were all relatable to medical sensibility.²⁹

When William Wirt, in 1803, ruminated on the orator's desire to "excite," he was still employing the vocabulary of nervous (a word that also meant vigorous, or even "manly") sensibility. This was how, he informed readers, the orator was to be regarded as other than a demagogic threat. For sympathy to have its positive effect, it had to be "excited" to reciprocity, or moral equality, rather than employed to sway the deceivable human system. Once excited, physiological "sympathies" conducted feelings through nerves and organs. While the circulatory system was classified as "irritable" rather than "sensible," the pulsation of the heart was a "sympathy" (note Wirt's aforementioned use of the word *palpitating* as a desirable quality in oratory) as was the "reciprocal sympathy" between brain and stomach. Arthur May, candidate for a medical degree at the College of Philadelphia in 1799, wrote in his dissertation that sympathies routinely "vibrate" throughout the body and "undulate" to the "remotest boundaries." The entire mind and body were, he wrote, "one mass of general sympathy." Depending on whether it was used properly or misused, like the moral sense itself, a sympathy borne of nervous sensibility could be linked with moral uplift or moral confusion, political progress or political

of Learning (Chapel Hill, 1986), 49, 138. The 1813 Philadelphia edition of the *Dictionary* offers a range of definitions for *course*, including "race; career," "method of life; train of actions," "uncontrolled will," "series of consequences," "order or succession." "To course" meant "to hunt; to pursue." See also the discussion of "course" as motion, in the phrase "in the course of human events," in Wills, *Inventing America*.

²⁹ *Medical Extracts* . . . , 139-41, 307-11. Such perceptions gave rise to the "conjectural science" of physiognomy. The writings of the most renowned physiognomist, the Swiss Johann Caspar Lavater, were widely distributed in America during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when many people were fascinated with the notion that faces revealed character. See J. C. Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy; for the Promotion of the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind* (Boston, 1794); and *The Pocket Lavater* (New York, 1817).

anarchy. Whether in the physical body or the body politic, sympathies could contribute to either harmony or division.³⁰

Studying physiology led to the identification of those in society who possessed a superior capacity to think and feel. Physiological elements in such morally driven literature of sympathetic masculine sensibility of the 1760s and 1770s as that of Laurence Sterne and the Scottish Henry Mackenzie has been underappreciated by historians for the political messages they deliver.³¹ These authors' books, importantly for our discussion, were reprinted regularly well into the nineteenth century. The sympathetic impulse and language of the heart, drawn alike from eighteenth-century medical and literary models, provided a vocabulary for demonstrating personal commitment beyond the message contained in popular sermons. Sterne, an Anglican minister, embodies this trend, for his published *Sermons* emphasized reverence for God far less than duty to the living. "Inquiry after Happiness," "Philanthropy Recommended," "Vindication of Human Nature," and "Self-Knowledge" all projected profound optimism about the life of imaginative commitment.³²

The literary contributions to political sympathy are even more apparent and directly revealing than the medical contributions. The prototypical epistolary novels of Samuel Richardson, *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747), criticize aristocratic pride while aiming to rescue deserving women from seduction and ruin. Virtue is always on trial in a most personal, and yet publicly revelatory, way, and the susceptible heart (a softened masculinity) is led to accomplish universal good. In Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), patience and humanity are rewarded, the seduced woman is restored to honor, and an overall glowing generosity matches an unbreakable spirit; in the novel, the central character, Dr. Primrose, refers to his family as a "little republic."³³

³⁰ Benjamin Rush, *Lectures on the Mind*, ed. Eric T. Carlson *et al.* (Philadelphia, 1981), 238ff; Arthur May, *An Inaugural Dissertation on Sympathy* (Philadelphia, 1799).

³¹ G. S. Rousseau, "Nerves, Spirits, and Fibres: Towards Defining the Origins of Sensibility," in R. F. Brissenden and J. C. Eade, eds., *Studies in the Eighteenth Century*, III (Toronto, CAN, 1976), 137-57; John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, UK, 1988); Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore, 1998).

³² *The Writings of Laurence Sterne, Large Paper Edition: The Sermons of Mr. Yorick* (2 vols., Boston, 1927).

³³ On the seduction theme in eighteenth-century novels, see esp. R. F. Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade* (New York, 1974); and Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield* (New York, 1961) (quotation at 23).

The immensely popular Sterne is credited with having popularized the adjectival form of the word *sentiment*, attempting to teach people to recognize the height of feeling in ordinary encounters. In *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67) and *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), he exposed human vulnerability with unprecedented candor and suggestive language; his project in the latter work was to remove "impediments in communicating our sensations out of our own sphere." Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1770), another top seller in America into the nineteenth century, introduced a protagonist who cannot bear to witness any person's suffering and feels compelled to act to relieve it.³⁴

The character Harley, Mackenzie's Man of Feeling, is the ultimate example of sympathy, an idealized human model of moral reformation. This sentimental literary figure proves his republican credentials at least as profoundly as the theorized "classical republican" who anxiously decries aristocratic luxury and extravagance; Harley rejects all pride and vanity in order to provide comfort to others and a home for the homeless. The characters of Richardson, Goldsmith, Sterne, and Mackenzie all indulge their emotions in order to become masters of their selves, atoning for masculine roughness, overcoming temptation so as to attain greater honor, and performing unselfish acts of charity to remedy ills and effect social justice more generally.³⁵

As Ann Jessie Van Sant explains, the term *sensibility* is associated with the body, and the term *sentiment* with the mind, the first an expression of the physical process of sensation and the second a manifestation of refinement of thought. "Both were important terms," she writes, "in the general shift of the foundation of moral life from reason and judgment to the affections." By the revolutionary period, this language coordinating interior function and interior experience, laws of nature and human psychology, was well ingrained. Van Sant goes on to point out that social conscience and sympathetic feelings were both visual and tactile: humanity became policy as organizations formed to clean up vice, relieve

³⁴ Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*, ed. Graham Petrie (London, 1967), 11-12, 33; Max Byrd, *Tristram Shandy* [a work of literary criticism] (London, 1985); Valerie Grosvenor Meyer, ed., *Laurence Sterne: Riddles and Mysteries* (London, 1986); Frank Brady, "Tristram Shandy: Sexuality, Morality, and Sensibility," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 4 (Autumn 1970): 41-56; Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling* (1770; rep., New York, 1821).

³⁵ In *Sentimental Democracy*, I feature Mackenzie's Man of Feeling as a typology meant to support an understanding of sentiment and sympathy as enduring American values rooted in the revolutionary idiom; the same qualities are attributed to the father of the title character in Susanna Rowson's popular sentimental novel of 1791, *Charlotte Temple*.

“wretchedness”—the seduced woman, the prostitute—and give charity, because the offended eye was linked to the soul (Sterne’s character Tristram Shandy calls the eye “the quickest commerce with the soul”). The proliferation of sentimental novels heightened social awareness, raising the potential to expand the sense of touch to being “touched”—internalizing identification, provoking a generous response on the basis of subjective experience.³⁶

How were these same values promoted on the streets of revolutionary America? The orations delivered on the anniversary of the Boston Massacre each year from 1771 to 1783 tapped the power of generous sympathy as conveyed by a moralizing literature; they also underscored the value of sympathy as a means of consolidating public purposes. “A brave nation is always generous,” insisted James Lovell on the first anniversary of the tragedy. (“The brave are always humane,” Judith Sargent likewise wrote, in the 1778 letter to her brother.) More emotionally wrenching was Dr. Joseph Warren in 1772, conjuring cataclysmic images that likened the potential fate of Boston to that of the seduced woman in a sentimental novel: “our children subjected to the barbarous caprice of the raging soldiery,—our beauteous virgins exposed to all the insolence of unbridled passion.” Similarly, Paine, in *Common Sense*, would extrapolate: “Can ye give to prostitution its former innocence? Neither can ye reconcile Britain and America. . . . As well can the lover forgive the ravisher of his mistress, as the continent forgive the murders of Britain. . . . The social compact would dissolve . . . were we callous to the touches of affection.” Popular language demonstrates without much subtlety the political propaganda value of sympathy born of sensibility.³⁷

Another aspect of Warren’s 1772 oration, also present in Jefferson’s Declaration four years later, was the heart-rending rhetoric that used rich sensory imagery to distinguish compassionate kindred from insensible or unfeeling aggressors. Warren calls out: “Language is too feeble to paint the

³⁶ Van Sant, *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel*, 4-5, 29. Van Sant distinguishes in this light how Locke’s epistemology encounters the physiology of sensibility (“There is nothing in the mind that was not previously in the senses”) but is not interested in sensation before it becomes an idea. Locke’s concept of mind equates “seeing” with “understanding” and resists the metaphorical “touch.” For Van Sant, touch is the “central sense” in a psychology of sensibility. See *ibid.*, 87-91. Yet Locke cannot be excluded from the list of thinkers interested in affective social interaction.

³⁷ *Orations Delivered at the Request of the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston to Commemorate the Evening of the Fifth of March, 1770* (Boston, 1785), 7-16; Paine, *Common Sense*, 35-36. On the gendering of power in sentimental novels, see especially Stern, *The Plight of Feeling*.

emotions of our souls, when our streets were stained with the blood of our brethren,—when our ears were wounded by the groans of the *dying*, and our eyes were tormented with the sight of the mangled bodies of the dead.”³⁸ Sensible parts—ears, eyes—felt pain, as much as in the Declaration insensible Britain was termed “deaf to the voice of justice and consanguinity.” Through political sympathy, literate Americans found a language of affinity in order to constitute a national response to a sense of powerlessness and insult. Patriots willed self-esteem with a variety of vocabularies, including that which traditional studies of republicanism have spoken to (fear of governmental interference and abuse, the perceived need for public virtue and reciprocity) and that which the same historiography has essentially ignored (affection among the patriots themselves). Jefferson’s original draft of the Declaration cited “agonizing affection” at the moment of crisis, a remarkable image that suggests again why it is necessary for us to take account of the varied sources of that emotional vocabulary used to publicize issues.

Although the idealized Man of Feeling was invariably a member of the elite class, public support was essential from others whose social position or whose intellectual attainments were not as outstanding as those patriots whose libraries contained the sophisticated political and historical texts upon which republicanism has relied. In *The Other Founders*, Saul Cornell demonstrates the significance of the “middling” democracy among influential Anti-Federalists, those who made the reading public aware that virtue required a verifiable sensitivity to common concerns. Cornell writes, “In addition to the traditional republican notion of disinterested virtue, politicians had to demonstrate a capacity for sympathy with those they represented.” To outspoken non-elite critics, the national legislature was meant to include merchants, farmers, and mechanics, as well as the traditional elite, whose motives could not always be trusted. Social harmony, the “middling” forces insisted, grew from an acknowledgement of the separateness of interests and of natural (not simply rhetorically constructed) ties between the people and their representatives.³⁹

Americans’ anxieties always concerned more than the question of virtue, more than their critique of the artificiality of aristocracy. In their overwhelming production of sermons and other public exhortations, patriots exhibited an underlying confidence that, in addition to being the

³⁸ *Orations Delivered at the Request of the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston*, 17-24.

³⁹ Saul Cornell, *The Other Founders: Anti-Federalism and the Dissenting Tradition in America, 1788-1828* (Chapel Hill, 1999), 80.

beneficiaries of providential purposes, they possessed a capacity for compassionate commitment that stood to protect them as individuals and as a united people from the kind of moral decay they easily attributed to the culture of the Old World from which they were gradually being weaned.⁴⁰ Thus the boundaries of republicanism inevitably had to expand. Republicanism's concern with public morals and deriving a definition of "the people" certainly remained valid. But it became clear that the opposition of political qualities (of dignity and honor versus licentiousness, for instance), devoid of emotional content, cannot encompass the true meaning of republican liberty. This is why the gendered world of parlor and tea table offered a tone of political criticism that classical republicanism had failed to describe. The work of Linda Kerber, Cathy Davidson, and Jan Lewis adheres to the republicanism model, but recognizes, too, the importance of sentiment. The republican mother played a political role, using sympathetic feeling to inculcate republican ideas in her children. In Kerber's words, she "integrated political values into the domestic sphere," which "justified continued political education and political sensibility." Davidson's work serves to broaden the political spectrum to include novels, a reading public of both men and women, who sympathized with morally embattled literary characters; she makes much of the so-called "first American novel," William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789). Lewis reveals how magazine literature offered a vocabulary of marital reform, private manners, and sentiment, that constituted home values deemed essential to the development of the nation as a whole.⁴¹

The transformation of vital forces inside the body—tremulous, unseen nerves—into carriers of generous feelings, or sensibility, may have been

⁴⁰ On the language of the political millennium, see Bloch, *Visionary Republic*; John F. Berens, *Providence and Patriotism in Early America, 1640-1815* (Charlottesville, 1978); and Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty*; Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*. The evolution of gentility in America is the subject of David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill, 1997); and Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York, 1992). Political tendencies of arguments over the nature of feeling, patriarchy, and public manners, form the subject of G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 1992).

⁴¹ Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, 1980), 11-12; Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York, 1986); Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 44 (Oct. 1987), 689-721; and Lewis, "'Of Every Age Sex & Condition': The Representation of Women in the Constitution," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 15 (Fall 1995), 359-87, which highlights the liberal sentiment of James Wilson; see also Rosemarie Zagarri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother," *American Quarterly*, 44 (June 1992), 192-215.

most apparent in sentimental fiction, but its application to the history of the Revolution was also stunningly conveyed. In his *History of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1789), for example, South Carolina physician David Ramsay used language borrowed from this genre to place the British and American causes in opposition. Stressing the unfeeling nature of British "rapacity," the "rage for plunder" and "wanton destruction," Ramsay makes the surrender at Yorktown sensational. "Well authenticated testimony," he writes, "asserts that the nerves of some [Americans] were so agitated, as to produce convulsions, and that at least one man expired under the tide of pleasure which flowed in upon him."⁴²

In medicine, literature, and politics, sensibility was nothing without sympathy. In 1774, Essex County, New Jersey, freeholders passed a resolution expressing "our most affectionate Sympathy for the cruel treatment of our [Boston] brethren." Amid the Federalist-Republican schism of the 1790s, the Democratic Society of Chittenden County, Vermont, feeling Anglophobic, recurred to this same language of sympathetic fraternity, separating decent citizens from those who retained aristocratic British principles: "Let our generosity to others be great and extensive, but bounded by the necessary line of safety to ourselves and our dear bought rights." Formerly "unsuspicious," acting upon their innate moral sentiment, America's once "faithful children" professed that they were no longer easy dupes who would allow aggressive forces to take advantage of their vulnerability and bully them.⁴³

Sentiment and sympathy proved indispensable in calamitous times. Delineating the political boundaries of sympathy and having them make sense over the long run was, however, quite an unsettling task. As Bernard Sheehan capably demonstrates in his treatment of Jeffersonian philanthropy and Indian relations, sympathy may have served the revolutionary cause and

⁴² David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*, ed. Lester Cohen (2 vols., Indianapolis, 1990 [1789]), 2:590. At the same time, Ramsay quotes General Washington's statement to the victorious troops, urging that all give thanks with "that sensibility of heart, which the recollection of the surprising and particular interposition of providence in our favor claims."

⁴³ June 11, 1774, in *The Papers of William Livingston*, ed. Carl E. Prince (5 vols., Trenton, NJ, 1979), 1:16-19; Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Democratic-Republican Societies, 1790-1800: A Documentary Sourcebook of Constitutions, Declarations, Addresses, Resolutions, and Toasts* (Westport, 1976), 282-89.

sustained Jefferson's harmonious vision for the Republic, but it failed to account for resistance to cultural combination.⁴⁴

Jefferson was unable—indeed no American president proved able—to consider the problem of Indians' displacement outside the perceived need to transform their behavior so that it approximated the model of Euro-American sensibility. In 1826, not long after Secretary of State Henry Clay charged that “there was never a full-blooded Indian that took to civilization,” President John Quincy Adams confided to his diary that he was uncomfortable meeting with a Creek delegation, knowing that he could not stem the tide: “If I indulged any sympathy for them,” he wrote, “it would imply censure upon the treaty, which we must yet maintain.” The powerful in a republic, considering themselves and their motives as decent, feared being perceived by the tribes as aggressive or intimidating. Thus, to protect the ideal of republican sympathy, conquest and assimilation had to be seen as sincere, moral, and regenerative.⁴⁵

Wirt, like Jefferson, amplified the cause of sympathy by invoking the Indian example. In Letter IV of *The British Spy*, as his aristocratic traveler ambled about the plot of earth from which Pocohontas and her people had disappeared, he became excited about the sad fate of the Powhatan Indians. Wirt wanted to predicate sympathy toward the Indians on the basis of their capacity to establish a common kinship with civilized whites: “to bind their interests and affections by the nearest and most endearing ties, and to make them regard themselves as one people, the children of the same great family.” As he led up to the main body of his observations, Wirt chose words that are designed to elicit an immediate sympathetic response: “irresistible force,” “truly afflicting consideration,” “poor trembling natives,” “the conscience of a gentleman,” “the unabating spite and frenzy of conscious impotence.” He abrasively bid Virginians to confront the aboriginals and “make them forget, if you can, that once this charming country was theirs; that over these fields and through these forests their beloved forefathers, once, in careless gaiety, pursued their sports and hunted their game.” He posed, with offended sensibility: “Let me not be told that the Indians are too dark [the metaphor rationalizing African inferiority is obvious here] and fierce to be affected by generous and noble sentiments.

⁴⁴ Bernard W. Sheehan, *Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian* (Chapel Hill, 1973).

⁴⁵ Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams* (1874-77; rep., 12 vols., Freeport, NY, 1969), 7:90, 113; Michael D. Green, *The Politics of Indian Removal: Creek Government and Society in Crisis* (Lincoln, NE, 1982). Also see Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, CT, 1973).

I will not believe it. Magnanimity can never be lost on a nation which has produced an Alknomok, a Logan, and a Pocahuntas." Once again, this word *magnanimity*, the nearly constant denominator of generous sympathy in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century texts, connotes at once unity of purpose, dignity of spirit, disinterested patriotism, and harmonious calm.⁴⁶

There is, again, a curious relationship in the discourse surrounding political sympathy between the quest for national harmony and the transcendence (and democratic suppleness) of oratory. It was Jefferson who had first popularized the example of Chief Logan, a Shawnee whose family was annihilated by unfeeling whites. It was Jefferson whose expression of magnanimous sentiment Wirt was clearly reciting in making sympathy part of his own self-fashioning as a political being. The *Notes* relates the Logan parable in the context of praising the Indian for his natural eloquence. Logan, "long distinguished as a friend of the whites," receives the reader's sympathy as a sincere representative of a "much-injured people" (as the colonies in 1776 were a much-injured people) subject to capricious and even violent treatment. In a speech that Jefferson declared to have been as great as that of any of the orators of ancient Greece and Rome, the bereaved Logan mournfully offered: "There runs not a drop of my blood in the veins of any living creature." Appreciation for the Indians' humanity is the timeless lesson meant to be learned here. "They astonish you," wrote Jefferson, "with strokes of the most sublime oratory; such as prove their reason and sentiment strong."⁴⁷

Nature produced speech, which drew upon nervous sensibility to stimulate the moral sense and achieve humanitarian social effects. Jefferson was a lifelong admirer of the epic poetry of Ossian, steeped in the imaginative portrayals of Celtic warriors of old who lived in a sense like Indians but were morally opposed to killing. They were men of melancholy; their tales celebrated the individual human spirit and extended to affectionate social bonds. In his commentary on the poems, the Scottish arbiter of refined speech and taste, Hugh Blair, wrote that Ossian was "prompted by his feelings; and to speak from the abundance of his heart."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Wirt, *The Letters of the British Spy*, 161-69; on the use of "magnanimity," see Burstein, *Sentimental Democracy*, 6, 54, 58, 60, 80, 128, 219, 230.

⁴⁷ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. Frank Shuffelton (New York, 1999), 67-68, 147.

⁴⁸ Hugh Blair, "Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian," in James Macpherson, trans., *Poems of Ossian* (London, 1807), 102-11. Macpherson, of course, fraudulently professed these poems to be genuine, rather than his own creation. Jefferson was (at least in the 1780s, as he expressed to young John Quincy Adams) convinced of their authenticity as a relic of the third century. See also John Dwyer, "The Melancholy Savage: Text and

Indians' capacity for civilization—the moral potential to deserve full citizenship—was linked to their capacity for sensible persuasion, something that Jefferson notoriously denied black Americans in commentaries and letters written around the same time. Blacks, he said, reacted without any “tender, delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation”; their griefs were “transient,” their imaginations “dull, tasteless, and anonymous.” If Jefferson's was the republic of “feeling,” those of African traits could be guiltlessly excluded from the republic on the basis of a presumed insensible temperament. Blacks were worthy of condescending pity, but not worthy of the enlightened sympathy accorded to Indians.⁴⁹

When recast and reclassified through the prism of “feeling,” speech and visual appearance were used subtly to discredit women as well. Women, when removed from their “proper” place in society, were thought to provoke, to excite dangerous passions. Society's emotional balance was said to require that women remain politically disembodied, constrained by an enforced code of manners, displaying demure countenances and draped in layers of clothes meant to hide themselves from men. As Nancy Isenberg writes in *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America*, enforced modesty (or austerity) denied women equal participation in the public arena; their restricted voices, as symbolically as their dress, denoted assertive speech as a male preserve, obliging every “proper” woman to avoid becoming a public “spectacle.” This was the argument used to exclude women from the rights of citizenship. There were reactions, however, even in the early years of the Republic: the general heightening of emotions wrought by the politicization of sentiment and sympathy found its way into the public through formidable essays on equality of the sexes by Judith Sargent Murray and the independent female characters created by novelists Susanna Rowson and Hannah Webster Foster. Republican sympathy, then, was rhetorically powerful but coercive and patriarchal.⁵⁰

Scholars should be wary of the easily arrived at consensus. The Whig science of politics was not understood in the same way up and down the

Context in the Poems of Ossian,” and Paul J. Degatano, ““This Source of Daily and Exalted Pleasure’: Jefferson Reads the Poems of Ossian,” in Howard Gaskill, ed., *Ossian Revisited* (Edinburgh, UK, 1991); and Louis I. Bredvold, *The Natural History of Sensibility* (Detroit, 1962), chap. 3.

⁴⁹ Shuffelton, ed., Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query VI & XIV; this argument is most clearly developed in Peter S. Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville, 2000).

⁵⁰ Nancy Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill, 1998), chap. 3; Stern, *The Plight of Feeling*, chap. 3.

social hierarchy. Nor was the culture of feeling. That is why further studies of oratory are needed to discern the emotional causes and effects of the Revolution. The sympathetic imagery of Joseph Warren's Boston Massacre oration was notably crafted to touch raw nerves, hold the attention, and secure the commitment not only of the most learned but the majority of ordinary citizens—men and women. The earlier efforts of George Whitefield, whose cross-colonial evangelical phenomenon led farmers to throng to his performances and caused even Benjamin Franklin to pay tribute, and the revivals of the nineteenth century, combine to remind us of the mass attraction and endurance of this genre. Dramatic speech contained, as William Wirt said of great oratory generally, an inherent power as mysterious as the unseen nerve fibers it excited.

So, to consider again in the context of determining republican character Wirt's statement in *The British Spy* that an accomplished orator "binds the senses," one perceives that the writer is at once acknowledging the power of the senses to excite and marveling at the orator for applying his gift to arrest or suspend the normal operations of the senses. It seems undeniable that such a cultural understanding of human susceptibility to external and internal stimuli had a profound influence on the political tastes of (at the very least) literate American men and women during this anxious period of national self-creation. American novelist Charles Brockden Brown, directly acknowledging himself responsive to the language and literature of sensibility, centered the plot of *Wieland* (1798) on vulnerable, impressionable characters who know they cannot rely on laws of nature, on intellectual apprehension alone. And yet, they discover even more troubling effects in encountering the uncertainty of the senses—a ventriloquizing voice threatens identity, or sanity. Ventriloquism can be understood as the opposite of oratory: the first is secretive, the second open and public. In Brown's world, where passion rules, fear of personal dissolution under an altered nature upsets all hope of preserving stable social relations. Perhaps we ought to think of Wirt's designation of his invented British writer as a "spy" as a further reference to deception and distraction.⁵¹

To the two generations under consideration, Jefferson's and Wirt's, the unseen internal nature of life produced in people a consciousness of

⁵¹ Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland; or, the Transformation* (New York, 1973). In the same decade, novels of sensibility such as *The Coquette* and *Charlotte Temple* displayed the confusion associated with sympathy for the seduced tragic heroine. The cause of "fellow feeling" was encouraged, but was simultaneously undermined amid anxiety over anarchic possibilities in an environment shaped by political factionalism. See Stern, *The Plight of Feeling*.

movement. But this consciousness (and their reactions) was different from and less certain than a modern notion of progress, though it was in fact in the 1790s that *progress* as a verb entered Americans' vocabulary.⁵² For Jefferson, the physiology of the imperial crisis as expressed in the Declaration proved that convulsions could be met with the sturdy pulsation of the invincible Heart. He declared in 1786 that the Heart won the Revolution with its "enthusiasm" and "a few pulsations of our warmest blood," while the Head had only served to remind patriots of Britain's superior "wealth and numbers." Such language suited a time when establishment of the Republic required optimistic sentiment to offset observations in widely circulated letters and increasingly critical newspapers of moral lapses among once devoted revolutionaries.⁵³

For the revolutionaries' successors, convulsions may have seemed more mysterious and generated less optimism in the literary imagination, and yet it is important to bear in mind that Americans' vocabulary did not change significantly over the intervening years. Here was where secular and religious ideologies merged. In 1794, amid the party battles of that decade, Baptist minister Peter Thacher of Boston published a sermon reiterating the ideal of this age of sympathy. Referring to Job, he appealed: "These are the deep lamentations of a man greatly afflicted, and they paint a scene of woe which must be affecting to every humane and sensible heart." The preacher then went on to emphasize "the sensation of pity and sympathy . . . founded on the social nature of man. . . . It is not fit that our hearts should remain hard and callous, when those of our friends are breaking around us." In assessing the turmoil of the French Revolution, the pro-Jefferson newspaper *Aurora* recorded Fourth of July toasts in Philadelphia in 1793 to similar effect: "The Republic of France—Sympathy to her misfortunes, praise for her virtues," and "to the human race—may the great family of mankind, without distinction of countries or colours, be united by charity."⁵⁴

In the early nineteenth century, as newspapers disseminated the speeches of members of Congress, oratory became an ever more powerful

⁵² Kenneth Cmiel, "'A Broad Fluid Language of Democracy': Discovering the American Idiom," *Journal of American History*, 79 (Dec. 1992), 917; Americans' notion of progress at this time remained confined, cyclical rather than linear or unbounded in character.

⁵³ Jefferson to Maria Cosway, Oct 12, 1786, in Boyd *et al.*, eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 10:443-53; Burstein, *Sentimental Democracy*, chap. 5.

⁵⁴ Peter Thacher, *The Nature and Effects of Christian Sympathy* (Boston, 1794), 7-11, 20; *General Advertiser (Aurora)*, July 6, 1793.

device to accomplish the political goals of sympathy-bearing republicans.⁵⁵ Here we return to the model of William Wirt. Modest in origins, arduous in his efforts, Wirt himself rose to the position of U. S. attorney general by distinguishing himself as a consummate orator, beginning with his prosecutorial effort in the treason trial of Aaron Burr in 1807 and extending to his heralded joint eulogy of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. In the first instance, he famously defended purported conspirator Harman Blennerhassett by showing him to have been a pawn and victim of the seductive Burr. Like Dr. Primrose in *The Vicar of Wakefield*, wrongly imprisoned, he had lived contentedly in a pastoral scene amid virtue-filled domesticity until the aggressive interloper attempted to fill him with dreams of ambition, shattering innocence. And at the United States Capitol in 1826, memorializing the perfectly timed deaths of Adams and Jefferson on the national jubilee of Independence, Wirt proclaimed that it was the hearts of the founders as much as their heads which had secured the Republic.⁵⁶

Wirt's literary career, however, had culminated already in his sympathetic 1817 biography of orator Patrick Henry, whose "intimate knowledge of the human heart," as he previewed in *The British Spy*, was instrumental in causing America to declare its independence. For Wirt, Henry's strength of character and spirit of optimism—indeed, his entire success—derived from "acuteness of feeling" and lack of concealment. Even momentary failure did not cause any "chilling" in his "affections." Like the philanthropic Man of Feeling, Wirt's Henry "could not find it in his heart to disappoint any one who came to him for credit." This "most indulgent of human beings" was temperate, never swore, and was "kind and hospitable to the stranger." Though Henry owned few books, he remained the quintessential man of the people, a natural born leader: instead of reading great treatises, he "read men." There was something indescribable about the power of the naturally gifted orator to engross the spirit of the audience that, to Wirt, had to have some relationship with human

⁵⁵ See Andrew W. Robertson, *The Language of Democracy: Political Rhetoric in the United States and Great Britain, 1790-1900* (Ithaca, 1995); and the recent work of Sandra Gustafson on the symbolic and transformative power of voice, *Eloquence Is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America* (Chapel Hill, 2000).

⁵⁶ Nancy Isenberg, "'The Little Emperor': Aaron Burr, Dandyism, and the Conspiracy Trial of 1807," in Jeffrey Pasley, et al., eds., *Beyond the Founders*, forthcoming; William Wirt, *A Discourse on the Lives and Character of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, Who Both Died on the Fourth of July, 1826* (Washington, DC, 1826).

physiology, connected perhaps to the "pupillary faculty of dilating and contracting itself."⁵⁷

Patrick Henry's sympathy for others derived from his intuitive knowledge of human nature. Like America itself, he had "issued from the woods." And yet, through his great native talent, he broke "to pieces" the strongest, most aggressive, and intrigue-ridden government on earth. He did not, Wirt underscored, look to the examples of Athens and Rome for his inspiration; but through a profound appreciation for the human organism, he discovered what was necessary for public happiness: "His feelings were strong, yet completely under his command." The Man of Feeling, though reluctant to go to war, had become politically emboldened; he placed nation above self and found courage, and the result was America's freedom and restoration of honor and dignity.⁵⁸

Wirt himself belonged, however, not to the generation of the founders but that of their successors. His class background and his social aspirations, too, need to be incorporated into this analysis of his representative value: Wirt exemplified Gordon Wood's democratized citizen. As he launches into the transition from republicanism to democracy, Wood declares the principle of equality "the most radical and most powerful ideological force let loose in the Revolution." The "genius" that the founders meant to tap allowed a Wirt to rise, to claim (though not without an enduring sense of social insecurity and financial anxieties) an equivalency to inherited position. Through education, granted in Wirt's case through the largesse of a man of means, the father of an early classmate, the common lad became an American gentleman. He gained a political voice. He could comfortably assert his moral equality according to revolutionary principles that had been

⁵⁷ Wirt, *Letters of the British Spy*, 141, 144-45; William Wirt, *Sketches of the Life and Character of Patrick Henry* (Hartford, CT, 1832), 26-29, 32-33, 417-23. The symbolism of Patrick Henry is discussed in Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence*, 14, 94ff; also Looby, *Voicing America*, 266-78. I treat Wirt's Henry at length in *America's Jubilee* (New York, 2001), chap. 2.

⁵⁸ Wirt, *Letters of the British Spy*, 436-41. As a Man of Feeling himself, Wirt wrote his best friend, Dabney Carr, just after *The Letters of the British Spy* was published, that Carr's supportive criticism of the work was precious to him as "warm and affecting expressions of love and friendship." Their intimacy in letters was presented in essentially the same terms that Wirt used in developing a national literature with patriotic overtones. Insisting upon the limits of reason in establishing "conviction," Wirt concluded that the firmest opinions in life could not be obtained but "through the channel of sensibility." Wirt to Carr, Jan. 16, June 8, 1804, in John P. Kennedy, *Memoirs of the Life of William Wirt* (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1850), 1:108, 114-15. On Wirt's sense of his role as biographer, see Scott Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, 1999), 46-67.

fed by the eighteenth-century culture of sentiment, or as Wood puts it, an "egalitarian moral sense," "the real source of democratic equality."⁵⁹

Americans, explains Wood, long had wrestled with their inferiority complex. In the case he provides of Nathaniel Chipman, son of a Connecticut blacksmith and farmer, entering the legal profession after the Revolution and eventually becoming a judge did not prevent his being branded an aristocrat for his embrace of Hamiltonian Federalism (Hamilton, of course, himself owned to obscure parentage on a Caribbean island). The flip side is Wood's portrait of Matthew Lyon, Chipman's nemesis, born in even greater obscurity. Lyon was an Irish immigrant and indentured servant, who rose to political prominence after succeeding as an entrepreneur but gravitated to Jefferson's democracy, never ceasing to identify more with his real roots than with the stability-seeking elite. For both Chipman and Lyon, simply rising to republican (moral) respectability did not complete the process of acceptance.⁶⁰

More examples can be added a half-generation later to help reveal the transition to a democratic style of politics. Wirt and South Carolina congressman George McDuffie, born 1772 and 1790 respectively, resorted to the rhetoric of moral sentiment in their appeals to an audience representing political authority. Wirt had credentials of commonness but identified with the Virginia gentry; he married the daughter of Jefferson's friend and neighbor George Gilmer, and after her death won the hand of a daughter of the Richmond Federalist merchant Robert Gamble. He saw no aristocratic taint in marrying up, so long as his literary-oratorical message remained steeped in republican sympathy. McDuffie was almost a reincarnation of humbly born Patrick Henry: both men's fathers had been reared in Scotland; both had worked as storekeepers before becoming lawyers. McDuffie's physiognomy was undistinguished, but as a speaker in Congress somehow, mystifyingly, he radiated a sublime eloquence under a "convulsive power." At the end of 1825, McDuffie introduced an amendment resolution in the House, seeking to change the federal Constitution so as to reform the electoral college and democratize election of the president and vice president. Rely on the people, he proclaimed in a Jeffersonian cadence, for by "the laws of moral necessity" they could not but "will their own happiness." Curiously, McDuffie did not take issue with the social makeup of the United States Senate, still comparatively an "aristocratic" body—this "democrat" not only identified with the moneyed

⁵⁹ Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 232, 240.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 242-43.

establishment but went on to serve as a senator himself in the 1840s, after marrying the daughter of a wealthy planter.⁶¹

What is revealed? It was the *appearance* of aristocracy (arrogance and insensitivity to the plight of ordinary people) that the American Revolution sought to overthrow. It was an aristocratic temperament (moral intransigence) that came to be early identified with unfeeling policies. This is different from the open embrace of practical democracy. After 1800, to be a democrat meant, by and large, to acknowledge a certain sympathetic state of mind;⁶² as the nineteenth century wore on, oratorical skill became more demonstrably a determinant of democratized expression of public sentiment, drawing less and less closely on the physiological vocabulary undergirding eighteenth-century sensibility. The real “radicalism” of the Revolution lay in the standardization of an intensified language of moral assertiveness, defining the sympathetic republican.

Intuitive sensations both preceded and fortified the social transformation that Wood controversially asserts occurred, when he states: “The Revolution brought respectability and even dominance to ordinary people.” My point is that whether or not his assertion is true, Wood succeeds in identifying the “absurdity” in the minds of republicans that such a thing as “the *better sort of people*” could exist after the Revolution. Political epithets (the Chipman vs. Lyon contest) aside, this is what many Americans believed once they began to define themselves in sentimental terms: as long as republican sympathy reigned, they tolerated elite aspirations within their democracy.⁶³

From the Revolution onward, the language of feeling—identification with people’s heartfelt needs—provided a decisive vocabulary by which political leaders could claim true representation. Even the emotionally undemonstrative James Madison wrote in Federalist 57 that the members of Congress would be “bound to fidelity and sympathy with the great mass of the people” by “cords” (in the vocabulary of the day akin to nerve fibers) of “duty, gratitude, interest,” and even “ambition.” It was in this way that enlightened sympathy was meant to assist legal forms in holding the Republic together.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Burstein, *America’s Jubilee*, chap. 7.

⁶² See the discussion of Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s nonpartisan rendering of the term *democrat* in Burstein, *Sentimental Democracy*, 208–10.

⁶³ Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 8, 241 (citing Boston’s *Independent Chronicle* in 1785).

⁶⁴ Federalist number 57, in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York, 1961), 351, 353.

But historians must always take care not to adhere to a single standard, even to assume that the language of feeling (any more than the agreeable language of classical republicanism as taught religiously for a generation) was unmitigated by obstructive forces.⁶⁵ It was not just “a gentleman’s cosmopolitanism,” in Wood’s momentary simplification, that obliged the leaders of the new republic to voice sympathy and compassion for those previously dismissed as social inferiors.⁶⁶ Sympathy was in fact a growing measure of national self-definition—Americans becoming, rhetorically, the People of Feeling, in pronouncements meant to establish a nationalist tone of moral security. It enabled William Wirt to pronounce in a Fourth of July oration in 1800: “The very sound of the Fourth of July, gives rise to a train of thought and feeling so interesting to mankind—opens a survey so vast, so diversified, so august as might strike into silent astonishment the most sublime genius the world ever knew.” At this early juncture in his literary-political career, Wirt was connecting sound (sense) and heartfelt feeling (the mysteries of nervous physiology) with all-embracing political oratory perfectly suited, in his mind, to republican society.⁶⁷

This, too, is precisely what Illinois pioneer James Hall meant in his *Letters from the West* (1828) when he wrote of the frontier as the engine of future enterprise, where charitable settlers welcomed hard-pressed newcomers. As Americans moved west in greater numbers, he presumed, their self-image as a sympathetic people traveled with them: “Those who are driven by misfortune from their homes, go like exiles from the land to

⁶⁵ There are those, like Charles Royster in *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character* (Chapel Hill, 1979), who have examined explicit emotions, including apathy, alienation, and crises of conscience, among non-elites. Michael Durey’s *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic* (Lawrence, KS, 1997), shows the impact on political society of defiant English, Scottish, and Irish immigrants, journalistic gadflies who did not identify with a traditional approach to the literate expression of political ideas. The “middling sort” Anti-Federalists in Saul Cornell’s *The Other Founders* are the progenitors of an enduring spirit of resistance, the dissenting tradition in American politics. David Waldstreicher’s *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill, 1997) brings “federal feeling” to life in the creative (and at times ungenteel) public celebrations of diverse groups of citizens, with a clear emphasis on the sentimentalization of political expression. Kimberly K. Smith’s *The Dominion of Voice* (Lawrence, 1999) argues that mob action in America had a history of legitimacy within political discourse. Such books mark worthy attempts in today’s scholarship to unify inclusion-exclusion themes with more traditional expectations from the study of republicanism. Their authors understand that constituting the nation was a contentious process, linguistically and emotionally, as well as a series of great events.

⁶⁶ Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 224.

⁶⁷ William Wirt, *An Oration Delivered in Richmond on the Fourth of July, 1800* (Richmond, 1800), 3.

which fond recollection attaches a thousand charms, to a wilderness which fancy clothes with a thousand terrors. Every sympathy is awakened, and every tender feeling thrilled with anguish." Community development evoked new calls for sympathetic commitment, "for an American is never seen to turn a houseless wanderer from his door, or to refuse a morsel to the hungry."⁶⁸

Washington Irving meant something similar in his 1819 essay "English Writers on America" when he asserted: "The national character is yet in a state of fermentation: it may have its frothings and sediment, but its ingredients are sound and wholesome; it has already given proofs of powerful and generous qualities." And the oratorically gifted Daniel Webster proclaimed after a half century of republican government how foreign nations might identify with the union of sentiment forged in the 1770s: "In whatever part of the globe men are found contending for political liberty, they look to the United States with a feeling of brotherhood, and put forth a claim of kindred." In the American Republic, he was implying, power did not have to oppress; power could actually make sympathy and generosity more effectual.⁶⁹

So when the clever William Wirt devised *The Letters of the British Spy* as the work of a purported Englishman of rank, masquerading as an innocent in plain attire to "sit and decoy the human heart" and espie the American character, he was testifying to the fact that a nation exists when it is emotionally felt, not merely when an intelligentsia describes its legal right to exist or when historical precedent is found to justify its rebellious cause. When Wirt wrote of sympathetic oratory as a "secret intercourse from spirit to spirit," the subtle but forceful movement of eye and energy imparting "convictions and sensations," he was acknowledging that the public could be thrilled and permanently affected by heartfelt zeal.⁷⁰ When two men of modest origins, William Wirt and George McDuffie, presented the orator as democrat while marrying into money and striving to belong to a higher society, neither was concerned that he might be denying the limits of American democracy and the class basis of political authority.

The American Revolution required an emotional response from a diverse population. An elite understanding of classical republicanism was

⁶⁸ James Hall, *Letters from the West* (London, 1828), 315-16.

⁶⁹ Washington Irving, "English Writers on America," in *The Sketch Book*, part of *The Works of Washington Irving* (New York, 1897), 98; "Speech at Faneuil Hall on the Election of 1825," Apr. 3, 1825, in *Papers of Daniel Webster: Speeches and Formal Writings*, ed. Charles M. Wiltse (15 vols., Hanover, NH, 1974-89), 1:172-73. The merging of sympathy and power is a central tenet of Burstein, *Sentimental Democracy*, esp. chaps. 8 and 9.

⁷⁰ Wirt, *The Letters of the British Spy*, 100, 139-44.

not sufficient to mobilize a revolution nor reach deep enough into the populace; a language was drawn, then, from other sources: from medical literature, religious oratory, and morality tales like *The Man of Feeling*. The Man of Feeling gave the Revolution a human face, a reproducible literary prototype of the sympathetic citizen.

Sentiment and sympathy described a moral community. As David Waldstreicher writes of the 1780s, "real virtue was not an abstract quality of moral character; it was experienced and seen as patriotic *feeling*. This quality of feeling was intimately bound up with every affective, natural tie among people."⁷¹ By revisioning republicanism, we can and should amplify the power of feeling as a comparable standard by which to measure patriotic self-regard and cultural identity.

⁷¹ Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 73.